



# A Practical Approach to Journalism Ethics

By Kelly McBride



Digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are changing the way people create and consume journalism.

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**T**he digital age has transformed how journalism is created and distributed. With the ubiquity of cellphones and other mobile devices that can connect to the Internet, the lines between content consumer and creator are blurred and sometimes erased. As the number and type of content sources increases, so does the possibility of citizens receiving and acting upon distorted or dishonest information.

In this environment, citizens need credible and accurate journalism to understand their

community and the broader world, and to make informed civic decisions. Journalists adopt and uphold ethical standards that help assure their work serves the values of truth, transparency and community. By doing so, individual journalists and the organizations that publish their work earn public confidence in their competence and integrity. But how does a journalist adhere to the highest ethical standards?

Journalists everywhere uphold ethical standards by articulating

principles that embody the core values of journalism, which usually include these:

- Seek the truth and report it as fully as possible.
- Hold the powerful accountable.
- Give voice to the voiceless.
- Be transparent about your journalistic practices.
- Be fair and comprehensive in your approach to stories.
- Avoid conflicts of interest when possible and disclose competing loyalties.

## A Practical Approach to Journalism Ethics

- Minimize harm, particularly to the vulnerable.
- Remain independent from those who would use their influence to distort the truth in order to advance their own agenda.
- Place your loyalty to the citizens you serve above all other interests.
- Be vigilant and disciplined in your effort to verify information.
- Create a forum for public debate and criticism.

This list is meant to be an example of core principles, but it is not exhaustive. Every newsroom and association of journalists must identify its own list of principles that guide the mission and practice of journalism.

Once a journalist articulates core principles, making good ethical choices requires leadership, critical thinking, asking questions, identifying numerous

alternatives for the given situation, and ultimately selecting the alternative that best serves his or her journalistic purpose.

For instance, many journalists rely on anonymous sources to tell them what's really happening in government dealings. Let's say a source contacts you and tells you that an elected politician is taking bribes from local business in exchange for steering lucrative government contracts to that business. The journalist and his colleagues would begin by asking questions such as these:

- What is our journalistic purpose for pursuing this information? How does it serve citizens?
- What motive does this source have for revealing such corruption?
- Are there any documents publicly available that could corroborate the claim?

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Remaining loyal to the public—above all other interests—is a core principle of ethical journalism.

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To bolster your credibility as a journalist, always encourage sources to speak on the record. © AP Images

- Can the source get access to any documents or other evidence?
- How should we describe the nature of this source, his knowledge and why we are keeping his identity secret from our audience?
- Where can we find other sources to corroborate this information? Will they be named?
- What other reporting should we do to ensure we have a complete story?
- If we rely on this source, what should we do to protect him from harm?

These questions don't preclude the establishment of best practices surrounding anonymous sources. Some

newsrooms establish guidelines that encourage ethical journalism, such as these:

- Sources should generally be identified by name.
- Anonymity is a challenge to our credibility and should be granted rarely, and only for very important stories.
- If we publish information from an anonymous source, it must be corroborated by two other sources.

Such guidelines can be very helpful. But since guidelines cannot provide for every possible scenario, they should complement rather than substitute for the critical thinking necessary for solid ethical decisionmaking.

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Another scenario modern journalists often face is the question of what to do about information that has been introduced into the marketplace of ideas, perhaps through social media, but not verified. This might be a controversial cellphone video or photo, a document alleging corruption, or a narrative that has taken hold. When citizens of a community are widely discussing information that has not been vetted or verified, journalists must act to provide clarity. You might ask:

- What can we do to verify or discredit this information?

- How can we uncover more facts or context to enhance public understanding?
- What is our obligation to correct bad information introduced by others?
- When acknowledging this information, how can we make our confidence or lack of confidence clear?

For a journalist, confidence and competence come not from knowing all the answers, but from having a clear understanding of journalistic values and ethics,

combined with the intellect to ask good questions that reveal alternative solutions and new pathways to the truth.

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When new information is introduced into the conversation, such as a controversial image shared through social media, journalists must ask themselves what they can do to verify or discredit the authenticity of that information. © AP Images

